DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 306 CS 504 963

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TITLE Rhetorical Force and the Study of Organizational Communication.
PUB DATE Feb 85
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Fresno, CA, February 16-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Discourse Analysis; *Interaction; Language Patterns; *Organizational Communication; *Research Methodology; *Research Tools; *Rhetoric; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Rhetorical Force

ABSTRACT

Rhetorical force can be used to analyze interaction in organizational communication. In such an analysis, force is conceived of as being perceptual, arising out of interaction, aiding in understanding communication patterns, and increasing one's abilities both to anticipate actions and to plan or constrain one s actions. Rhetoric is a product of perceived choice; the more options for speaking or for understanding are available, the more individuals are motivated to engage in rhetorical action. If force is what underlies, or makes sense of, rhetorical action, then rhetorical force is grounded in what have been identified as the reasons for rhetorical action: the necessity for talk, resolution, invention, transformation, and change in identification. Rhetorical elements of force can be used to study the following characteristics of organizational communication: (1) productive and unproductive conflicts, (2) relational blockages, (3) standard operating procedures, (4) rhetorical situations, (5) transformations, (6) attempts at change in identification, and (7) self-reports of rhetorical force. (HOD)

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RHETORICAL FORCE AND THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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February, 1985

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CS 504 963

RHETORICAL FORCE AND THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

(abstract)

Rhetorical force is proposed as an organizing construct for the study of organizing and organizational communication. The concept of force is discussed, and the formulations of Lewin and Pearce and Cronen are used to define rhetorical force. Five elements of rhetorical force are detailed. Uses for the concept in the study of organizational communication are discussed.

Approximate number of words: 4500

RHETORICAL FORCE AND THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Mindful of their roots in rhetorical theory, organizational communication scholars have often been interested in attempts at persuasion within organizations. As Redding's 1972 review of organizational communication research indicates, early study centered on issues such as the effectiveness of house organs, positive and negative aspects of persuasion as a tool in resolving conflicts or motivating employees, the effectiveness of inspirational campaigns as tools for improving efficiency, and the role of credibility in promoting an effective communication climate.[1]

More recent studies have been more overtly rhetorical in their approach. Examples of such research have included rhetorical criticisms of advertising,[2] of speeches presented on behalf of an organization,[3] and rhetorically-based analyses of organizational roles.[4]

Some attempts have also been made to apply rhetorically-based theories to organizational research. One such attempt has used Bormann's symbolic convergence theory.[5] Based on the concept of the fantasy theme, or talk that does not focus on here-and-now reality, researchers have attempted to identify fantasy chains, dramas, and rhetorical visions to describe organizational processes such as leadership emergence,[6] and to indicate appropriate marketing strategies.[7]

Perhaps the most systematic contribution to a rhetorical approach to organizational communication has been made by Tompkins, Cheney, and their associates. Possibly spurred by his rhetorical analysis of communication during the Kent State crisis,[8] Tompkins began to focus his attention on

Burke's concept of identification and its organizational concomitants.[9] Cheney has joined in this work,[10] and the two have even begun the task of constructing a rhetorically-based theory of unobtrusive control in organizations.[11]

With the growing popularity of interpretive approaches to the study of organizational communication[12] there is a need for additional tools with which interaction may be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective. In this essay, I offer the concept of rhetorical force as the basis for building such an analytical tool. I begin by describing the concept of force in communication, as it comes to us from the work of Lewin and of Pearce and Cronen. I then offer six elements of rhetorical force, and I conclude by suggesting how these elements can be used in organizational communication research.

THE CONCEPT OF FORCE

The word force is one that is used imprecisely and often metaphorically in speaking about human behavior. In physics, force refers to the energy required to accelerate a body in a given direction, and so force is represented by a directional vector. This concept, while not adequate in describing human behavior, has nevertheless found its way into our vocabulary as we talk about our actions and those of others. We speak of being "forced" to do something, as if we had no choice in the matter, and that characterization is used to describe a surprisingly wide range of activities. Rape, for example, is characterized as "forced sex," though that use of the term seems quite different from seeing an

individual as being persuasive through "force of argument." Different still seems to be the notion that ideas themselves have some sort of "intellectual force."

Two somewhat related concepts of force inform the present discussion. The first is Lewin's idea of psychological force,[13] and the second is Pearce and Cronen's dimensions of what they call "logical force."[14]

Although Lewin's concept of force was borrowed from the physics of his time, its present value comes from the implications of the concept, rather than from the relatively crude geometric representations that Lewin attempted in his early work.[15] In fact, reviewers of Lewin's work agree that his principal contribution was a method of conceptualization, rather than a finished theory.[16] This method was claimed as being the basis for such well-known psychological theories as cognitive dissonance, network theory, social comparison theory, and attribution theory.[17]

Lewin's concept of force attempted to respond to the static causal assumptions of the classical conditioning approach to understanding human behavior. Rather than merely reacting to envrionmental stimuli, Lewin perceived humans as being creatures involved in a dynamic process of interaction with the environment. The key to this dynamic process, according to Lewin, was the ability of individuals to perceive themselves as situated in their environments. The limitations of this ability Lewin defined as being the individual's "field" at any given point in time. Although this field was subject to change as both the environment and the person changed, its key elements would always be present. These elements

included:

(a) Position. This concept referred to how an individual perceived the elements of the environment as located in relation to each other. These perceptions were organized around the individual and included the relations of the elements to that individual. The concept of role is a positional one in Lewin's scheme.

(b) Cognitive structure. Where position located an element of the field in relation to other elements, cognitive structure referred to the constellation of elements and how they related to each other. If, for example, an individual role was a positional concept, the range of roles an individual might play and how they relate to each other in that individual's mind was considered to be a part of cognitive structure.

(c) Tension. If the perceptual field was conceived as a system, tension referred to a lack of equilibrium within the system. Tension can be tolerated, or it can be used as the basis for change. An individual can sense tension resulting from hunger, for example, that may or may not be the result of deprivation of food. Depending on how the feeling of hunger was interpreted, the individual might choose to eat, to tolerate the feeling, or to engage in other behavior to divert the focus of attention away from the hunger.

The fact that every perceptual system experiences tension to some degree, resulting in part from both cognitive structure and immediate positional perceptions, creates conditions under which forces can operate. A force, then, represented a dynamic element that either impelled or constrained the relief of tension. A force that would impel

the relief of hunger pangs by eating might be the knowledge that it is mealtime. Likewise, the perception that hunger pangs are occurring when it is not yet mealtime may constrain eating. Forces were thus directional in that they pointed toward a position in the field. The power of forces resulted in locomotion, or action that served to rearrange the positions of the field's elements. Most locomotion was classified as "behavior," and thus behavior could be predicted from knowledge of the magnitudes and directions of the various forces within the field.

Three other concepts were related to the basic process of acting on perceived forces. The first was habit. Based on early experimentation, Lewin argued that habit actually results from forces that work to resolve tensions in a consistent manner.[18] The second was goal, which Lewin described as a field of forces that are all directed toward the same position. Finally, Lewin defined conflict in terms of overlap of at least two force fields, resulting in equally strong but opposing forces meeting at the same position. Later in this paper, I shall indicate how these concepts relate to a rhetorical examination of communication in organizations.

To summarize Lewin's position, the concept of force represented the product of an individual's perceptions of and interactions with the relationships among elements of the environment. These elements included the individual's perceptions of physical entities, or such psychological factors as cognitive structure. Forces were directional and either impelled or constrained action. Lewin used a geometrical metaphor to

place these perceptions within a "space," locating the various elements as positions in that space. To Lewin, behavior (or locomotion) resulted from dynamic action designed to reduce systemic tensions.

Where Lewin's concept of force implied that an individual interacted with the environment, Pearce and Cronen's use of the concept of force was more overtly interpersonal in its orientation.[19] Pearce and Cronen used the concept to describe a "logical force" that emerges from attempts to coordinate an ongoing conversation. As these authors described it, "Logical force is created by the combination of rules for meaning and action. It exerts the force of perceived oughtness on the performance of particular acts. The configuration of logical force and its strength depend on the structure of rules in the interpersonal rule system."[20] To understand the ideas behind the concept of logical force, Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning theory must be summarized.

The coordinated management of meaning (CMM) is based on the assumption that social reality is both constructed and understood in terms of interpersonal communication. If we are to "get along" in society, we must have a means of being able to act in ways that are socially acceptable. Our major means of acting in a socially acceptable manner, according to Pearce and Cronen, is through coordination of our actions with those of others. Even when we are not certain about the meaning of our actions, such as when we attend a religious service in an unfamiliar church, patterning our behaviors after those of the others around us will keep us from being perceived as a misfit.

Typically, however, we do not operate on such a basal level of

understanding. Rather, we interpret our experience in terms of our knowledge of how patterns of action are formed. The basic unit of meaning in CMM is the speech act, which presumes that we have some means of categorizing action and of understanding units of action in terms of how they fit into a pattern. In fact, even though the speech act is basic interpretations of speech acts are "meaningful" only at the episode level, since episodes exhibit organized and coherent beginnings, middles and ends.

The means by which speech acts are recognized from action and are in turn organized into episodes is by use of constitutive and regulative rules. Although constitutive rules inform the production of regulative rules, it is the latter category that provides the understanding, or logic, of episodes. Regulative rules are used both to anticipate the actions of others as well as to plan appropriate action of one's own. The fact that the activity of coordination produces a pattern different from what would have been produced by the individuals involved is what forces the episode's logic. Logical force increases in strength as the possible number of choices for behavior in the situation narrows.

Logical force comes in two varieties: <u>prefigurative</u> force, which results from knowledge of rules about what might be anticipated in "situations such as this one," and <u>practical</u> force, which relies on individuals' understandings of the meanings of actions in the immediate situation and allows for planning of future action intended to accomplish a goal. The ways in which actions are linked together by rules provides the basis for both kinds of logical force: we "know" how to act in a

situation because we can adapt our experience in similar situations to fit this one, or we "notice" how another is acting and we decide how to act in order to reach a desired end.

The use of the concept of force in CMM is related to but somewhat different from that of Lewin. Where Lewin saw force as residing primarily in individual perceptions that interacted with the social environment, Pearce and Cronen saw force both as arising from interaction and as giving meaning to that interaction. Where Lewin saw force as a means of resolving tension, Pearce and Cronen conceived of force as a natural outcome of any social interaction. In fact, Pearce and Cronen's use of force may be more operational, since its strength may be inferred by disecting conversation to determine the strategies being employed, the patterns of interaction that might be found, and the regulative rules that underlie those patterns.

Force, then, need not be thought of solely in physicalistic terms. Rather, it can be conceived as perceptual, arising out of interaction, as aiding in the understanding of communication patterns and as increasing our abilities both to anticipate actions and to plan or constrain our own actions.

ELEMENTS OF RHETORICAL FORCE

The analysis of the concept of force, as it might be used to study rhetorical communication, implies that while force results from interaction it may be analyzed at the individual or at other relational, such as the interpersonal or organizational levels. I shall address the

matter of means by which these analyses may be conducted later in the paper. For now, however, I am concerned with describing the elements that may constitute rhetorical force.

Rhetoric is a product of perceived choice; the more options for speaking or for understanding are available, the more individuals are motivated to engage in rhetorical action. If force is what underlies, or makes sense of, rhetorical action, then rhetorical force ought to be grounded in what have typically been identified as the reasons for rhetorical action. A review of these reasons yields five potential bases for rhetorical force: (1) necessity for talk; (2) necessity for resolution; (3) necessity for invention; (4) necessity for transformation; and (5) necessity for change in identification.

Necessity for Talk

Rhetoric is goal-oriented. If Lewin's analysis of the forces underlying rhetoric is a correct one, that should mean that all forces in the field should point in the same direction. Because rhetoric is also interpersonal, however, there is not always agreement about either the end or the means. Consequently, the overlapping forces that enter the field produces what Lewin describes as conflict. Besides arising out of interaction, conflict may also be anticipated and planned for as part of an individual's rhetorical strategy.

Talk is essential to rhetoric. By making such a statement, I do not mean to imply that talk is limited to words or that messages cannot just as clearly be communicated by nonverbal actions. After all, silence is not only golden, it is oftentimes eloquently telling. Nevertheless, talk

is the stuff of which most rhetoric is made.

In achieving a rhetorical goal or in resolving conflict, talk provides the greatest range of strategic choices. If the goal cannot be achieved or the conflict resolved through talk, then the number of choices are reduced. If I am adamantly pro-choice on the subject of abortion, I may know that I have very little chance of succeeding in conversation with an individual who holds pro-life views. In such an instance, I may either opt not to talk at all or I may not expect to be goal-oriented during the interaction. In either case, rhetorical action becomes less likely. As we can expect talk to help us achieve our rhetorical goals, rhetorical force increases.

Necessity for Resolution

Cronen, Pearce and Snavely have discussed the problem of enmeshment within episodes.[21] Essentially, this problem arises when an individual feels trapped in an interaction, when the conversational strategies seem to repeat themselves, either within the context of the interaction or from previous encounters, with little or no progress being noted. In such a case, a problem exists but no resolution of the problem seems possible.

Bitzer's analysis of rhetorical exigence also makes this point.[22] Rhetoric becomes less necessary when people are "just talking," when they are engaging in habitual or routine activities, or when no problem seems evident. On the other hand, when a conflict is encountered or anticipated and when resolution of that conflict is important to the

ongoing relationship between the communicators, then rhetorical action is both desirable and likely. If, for example, a labor negotiation has stalled, and there is one last important conflict prior to the parties' ability to complete a signed contract, then rhetorical force is likely to be high.

Necessity for Invention

The term invention has been associated with rhetoric throughout its history, stemming principally from its status as the primary canon in Cicero's rhetoric. Yet, the use of invention here does not simply refer to the act of formulating ideas, though that act itself carries with it some rhetorical force. Rather, the sense of invention that most concerns rhetorical force is that of the ability to handle situations in new and productive ways.

Several recent writers have commented upon invention in this manner. Wallace, for example, distinguished between invention and memory in using topoi, pointing to Aristotle's distinction between fitting a customer with a pair of shoes from stock as opposed to designing shoes for that particular customer.[23] Howell, in writing of the "empathic" communicator, contended that such an individual was distinguished by the ability to improvise to fit the situation.[24] These sentiments were echoed by Pearce and Cronen when they described the optimally competent communicator as being one who was able to use actions to change the rules of the episode.[25]

To some extent, invention is present in all communication. Even so, our tendency is to develop normal patterns and routines for handling

interactions of similar varieties.[26] Such a tendency helps to relieve uncertainty and to help us avoid the necessity for reinvention when such a process would be counterproductive. The problem with this tendency is that we are also very likely to avoid invention through the use of routines. In such a case, we may act like the stereotypical bureaucrat, who will often ignore the demands of individual interactions in order to make each encounter "fit the mold."

To the extent the communication can be handled in a routine or previously worked-out manner, rhetorical force is low. As the necessity for invention increases, rhetorical force increases.

Necessity for Transformation

Related to the necessity for invention is the concept of transformation. While invention often deals with the ability to make the old new again, however, transformation is a creative property of rhetorical action that succeeds in changing the definition of the situation.

Patton provided a good contrast between invention and transformation in his essay on rhetorical creativity when he cited the statement made by Senator George Aiken at the height of our national frustration over the war in Vietnam. Instead of continuing to make statements about ending the war "with honor," as so many politicians of that era were doing, Aiken commented wryly that "the United States should declare that she had won the war in Vietnam and get out." The force of this new way of expressing what many had been thinking made Aiken's remarks immediately

memorable.[27]

Goffman has labeled the process of seeing situations in new and more creative ways "reframing."[28] Watzlawick and his associates have carried this idea one step further by contending that reframing is necessary to the promotion of lasting change.[29] Janis has warned against the tendency of groups to make common assumptions and to follow previously established patterns of talk, thus avoiding the creative impulse that often leads to superior decisions.[30] While not every situation requires transformation, certainly the perception that how one talks could lead to reframing is likely to be a force for rhetorical action.

Necessity for Change in Identification

Identification has also been a well-established correlate of rhetoric, principally through the writing of Kenneth Burke.[31] It is clear that the more an individual identifies with another person, a group, an organization, or an institution, the more open to influence will be that individual.

Yet, identification is something of a static concept when used in the traditional sense. While it is true that rhetorical strategy is often based on attempts to promote identification, we are not certain that increased identification produces any tendency toward rhetorical action on the part of the person whose level of identification has increased.

A helpful concept in resolving this problem is Burke's distinction between congregation and segregation.[32] Both processes promote identification in that congregation defines how feelings commonality may

be expressed, while segregation defines similarity by contrasting it with difference. In either case, identification evolves and changes, especially within organizations. An individual whose work is praised may decide that the organization is a wonderful place to work. If, six months later, that same individual does not receive as much of a raise as expected, feelings of identification with "those employees who are underappreciated" may result. At those times, patterns of identification change, and, so do the perceptions of what might be regarded as conditions for rhetorical action. Thus, it is change in identification, rather than identification itself, that engenders rhetorical force.

Certainly, these five elements are interrelated, though none of them are necessarily dependent on any other. Moreover, their effects may be additive but are not necessarily so. For example, someone may see a high degree of necessity for resolution but feels that the resolution can occur through moderate degrees of invention and almost no transformation of the situation. In such a case, the individual may consider rhetorical force to be high on the basis of the resolution issue alone. Rhetorical force is thus likely to be predictable solely in general terms and those predictions may not hold in anticipating how individual episodes might develop.

STUDYING RHETORICAL FORCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

While the use of rhetorical force in studying communication is certainly not limited to organizations, that context is ripe for interaction to which the elements of rhetorical force may be applied. If

we grant that Weick's aphorism, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" is particularly true for communication in organizations, then the process of organizing itself is a rhetorical one.[33]

At least that process begins with rhetorical acts. As Weick describes his model of organizing, our understanding of organizations begins with enactment of meaningful behavior, which is selected out of other behavior precisely because of its meaning, and that behavior is retained in such a manner that it influences future enactment within the organization.[34] The links between enactment and selection and between retention and enactment seem to be attributable to rhetorical force, as it is through rhetorical force that we come to understand how behavior can take on suasory properties and thus become embedded and influence future action.

Using the elements of rhetorical force, we can infer what we might fruitfully study about how communication works to shape the character of organizations.

(1) Productive and unproductive conflicts. Conflict provides the means by which organizations can grow and change. Studying the issues over which conflict occurs, both substantive and relational, can generate knowledge about what is important to the organization. Studying where conflict is perceived to be unresolvable through talk can be particularly useful in seeing where rhetorical force is blocked. Conflict may be studied in terms of its relational value, its content, and the structure of talk during conflict episodes.

(2) Relational blockages. Looking for relationships in the

organization that are not working can lead to an understanding of both organizational processes, such as why some people are isolated and others are overloaded, and rhetorical processes by examining how influence efforts have failed. The merging of separate interviews with parties who are in relationship will often lead to an understanding of why those individuals feel frustrated about their respective levels of necessity for talk and necessity for resolution.

(3) Standard operating procedures. Organizations tend to develop both formal and informal procedures for handling recurring situations. Studying these procedures will indicate not only what interactional patterns tend to occur frequently, but also how the force of necessity for invention has been alleviated in those situations.

(4) Rhetorical situations. The counterpart to standard operating procedures, rhetorical situations are those in which invention is perceived to be necessary. Descriptions of rhetorical situations can provide information about what the organization values and what are the parameters of rhetorical force in that organization.

(5) Transformations. Transformations can occur at the language use and the episode levels of interaction. Transformations in language use involve the learning or relearning of special ways in which members of the organization talk about their activity. Some corporations, such as Hewlitt-Packard ("The H-P Way") and Disney ("The Magic Kingdom") go out of their way to create elaborate sets of metaphors to influence how people who work there will talk. Other transformations occur through an individual's verbal shortcut, which is then picked up by others. Episode

transformations are often preserved as stories or as fantasy chains that demonstrate how rhetorical action resolved an exigence. Analysis of these transformations can indicate how the organization perceives the use of rhetoric to be productive, thus influencing future perceptions of rhetorical force.

(6) Attempts at change in identification. Cheney has already shown how organizational identification might be changed through his analysis of house organs and through structured interviews about organizational identification with employees.[35] Using Burke's concept of segregation as a guide, we might also analyze exit interviews to determine how individuals use rhetoric to indicate a change in identification away from the organization.

(7) Self-reports of rhetorical force. Up to this point, the methods of study implied by my suggestions have been primarily interpretive or critical. Yet, I believe that rhetorical force is also amenable to quantitative measurement, and I have made some strides in that area. Using an instrument that assessed necessity for talk, necessity for resolution, and necessity for invention, I presented students with rhetorical situations, asked them to write dialogue indicating how they would handle those situations, and then asked them to complete the scales indicating how they perceived those elements of rhetorical force operating within those situations. I found that systematic differences in rhetorical force resulted from how the situation was defined. Those rating situations involving intimate relationships indicated that they felt less need for invention but more need for resolution than those

rating situations involving nonintimate relationships. The nature of the individual's relationship with the other person in the situation also influenced perceptions of the necessity for talk and the necessity for resolution: those in the one-down role felt more necessity for talk than those in symmetrical or one-up roles, while perceptions of necessity for resolution ranged from highest in symmetrical roles, to lowest in one-up roles.[36] I plan to strengthen the instrumentation, add the elements of transformation and change of identification, and conduct this study again.

CONCLUSION

I have described here the concept of rhetorical force as an organizing construct for the study of organizational communication. I have suggested that rhetorical force is a product of interaction and that it aids communicators in deciding when to take rhetorical action, as opposed to using habits or routine methods of communicating.

Using rhetorical force to study organizations can help us to understand how the process of organizing works, how individuals come to understand the situations and relationships they encounter in everyday organizational life, and how interaction is formed. By using rhetorical force as a means of analyzing communication within organizations, we move one step closer to building a rhetorically-based theory of organizational communication.

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